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SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY - MORE COVERAGE OF AMBASSADOR WILLS'
4/24 REUTERS INTERVIEW ABOUT LTTE SUSPENSION OF TALKS AND
BALASINGHAM'S REPLY

REF: COLOMBO 0714

1. On April 21, the LTTE announced it was suspending peace talks. In a letter to the GSL, the LTTE listed its reasons for suspending talks as: its exclusion from the 4/14 Washington Conference, problems with the ceasefire accord implementation, and that GSL had not focused enough on rebuilding the economy of the North and East. On 4/24, Reuters ran an exclusive interview with Ambassador Wills focusing on USG reaction to this letter. The full text of the interview was later released to the press (Reftel Colombo 0707). On 4/25, LTTE Chief Negotiator and Political Advisor Anton Balasingham responded to the Ambassador's interview on Tamilnet, a pro-LTTE website. Sri Lankan media covered this exchange extensively. While news coverage of the Ambassador's comments and Balasingham's reply were concentrated in the Tamil press; English, Sinhala and Tamil media responded with extensive editorial comment and many opinion pieces. The main editorial theme in all languages was the need for the LTTE to heed the US and international community's words and return to the peace process. Usually skeptical opposition ISLAND and ISLAND SUNDAY delivered predictably stronger versions of the same message in editorial and opinion pieces.

Television and Radio.

2. In their 4/26 newscasts, independent and government-owned Sri Lankan telecasters (MTV and SLRC,) reported on Balasingham's response to the Ambassador. Independent MTV reported, "LTTE once again rejects US call to lay down arms," while government-owned SLRC noted, "Anton Balasingham says that they have not deviated from peace talks in response to US Ambassadors reaction to LTTE suspension."

Newspapers.

3. News coverage of the Ambassador's comments and Balasingham's reply were concentrated in the Tamil press. However, opposition English weekly, ISLAND SUNDAY, carried an Agence France-Presse (AFP) story as its main headline, "Balasingham softens stand on talks after US barrage" and also carried the full text of Balasingham's Tamilnet interview under the headline "LTTE responds to US Ambassador" (4/27). AFP excerpts: "The LTTE on Saturday assured the United States that they were not scuttling talks with Sri Lanka, two days after the US ambassador here slammed them for suspending peace negotiations...Diplomats here had seen the LTTE's sudden suspension of talks as brinkmanship and hoped that the negotiations could resume soon.... LTTE negotiator Balasingham sounded conciliatory in his remarks in the Tamilnet website, but refused the give up their weapons as demanded by the US."

Several Tamil papers also reported on Balasingham's response. State-owned THINAKARAN (4/27) headlined "Balasingham explains to US Ambassador that Tigers did not pull out from Peace talks" and reported that the LTTE motive was to give the government some time to make decisions. Independent SUDAR OLI (4/26) noted, "'Did not withdraw from talks - It's only a temporary suspension' Balasingham replies to US Ambassador." Independent THINAKKURAL (4/26) reported, "'Suspension of talks to provide time to the government' - Balasingham's explanation to Wills' comment."

Editorials.

4. **** Under the headline "Heed timely advice," independent English Daily Mirror (4/26), commented that Ambassador Wills' comments "need not be taken by the Tigers as a loss of face, but. a reflection of increasing loss of patience by the international community and particularly

USA over the LTTE's shrewd manoeuvrings." The editorial follows:

"While some diplomats play cloak and dagger games with Sri Lanka even when they are asked to play umpire, American Ambassador Ashley Wills has indeed come to play an honest broker's role."

"Here is the representative in this country of the world's sole super power, but the trappings of such power has not caused him to deliver blind sermons to us as has happened with envoys of some powerful countries in the past, who with their own agendas or having listened to the LTTE and their apologists' propaganda, would lecture us to no end."

"Now at least the Americans appear to have understood the game plan of the LTTE to blame everyone else except itself. Ambassador Wills while acknowledging continuing shortcomings on the side of the Sri Lankan Government like it "must do a much better job of delivering services and assistance" and "It's way too slow and bureaucratic," has squarely put the blame on the LTTE for its intransigence."

"Referring to Anton Balasingham's letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Mr. Wills observes: "letter makes it sound like it was only the mismanagement of previous Colombo Governments that impoverished the south of Sri Lanka, and that the devastation of the north and east is all government fault. That's ludicrous. Successive governments have made many mistakes, but if blame is being distributed fairly, the LTTE deserves a great deal as well. Its pursuit of an extreme separatist agenda, by violent means, has severely affected not only the north and east, but the rest of Sri Lanka too."

"The forthright interview given by Ambassador Wills to Reuters need not be taken by the Tigers as a loss of face, but is a reflection of increasing loss of patience by the international community and particularly USA over the LTTE's shrewd manoeuvrings. We hope it will serve as a timely warning to the LTTE. Mr. Prabhakaran holed up in tiny Wannai should think twice before he turns his back on this friendly advice from the US envoy."

"It should especially reflect on the following lines of Mr. Wills: "While the talks are suspended, we urge the LTTE to reflect carefully on its own transgressions. Assassinations of opponents, intimidation of Muslims, taxation without representation, aggressive Sea Tiger behaviour and continued child recruitment do not build trust in the LTTE's intentions.'"

***** Typically skeptical opposition English daily ISLAND, and weekly ISLAND SUNDAY offered editorial comment on 4/26 and 4/27. Under the 4/26 headline, "Hard talk can do more than dollars" the ISLAND notes, "Had western nations read the riot act to the LTTE on terrorism much earlier, the history of Sri Lanka would have taken a different course years ago." Excerpts:

"American Ambassador, Ashley Wills did some much needed plain hard talking in his interview with Reuters on the decision of the LTTE to suspend peace negotiations with the government."

"This straight from the shoulder stuff was much needed because in the convoluted rigmarole of the LTTE spokesman, Balasingham, to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe announcing the decision to suspend participation, an attempt was made to project that the LTTE was the aggrieved party, sweeping under the carpet, their belligerency and terrorism that took place, even while the Ceasefire Agreement was in force."

"If Prabhakaran, Balasingham and their cronies had thought that they could twist the arm of the Americans and other western powers with blackmail of suspending negotiations, these words of Ashley Wills, a resounding slap, was the answer. But this is not enough."

"Neither the Sri Lanka government nor the western powers involved in the peace process should yield to this blackmail of the LTTE. If the LTTE walks out of the negotiations, they do so knowing well that they place at stake international assistance very much needed to resurrect the war ravaged areas of the north and east as well as alleviating the suffering of the Tamils in these areas."

"It is evident that only the western nations where the expatriate Tamil community makes a living and sends money to the LTTE war chest that can make the LTTE do their bidding. Had western nations read the riot act to the LTTE on terrorism much earlier, the history of Sri Lanka would have taken a different course years ago."

"Plain hard talk by other western ambassadors could help this country much more than the millions of dollars they are willing to part with."

***** The Opposition English weekly ISLAND SUNDAY continued on (4/27), "Call the LTTE bluff" that if the LTTE stays out of the peace talks, it "must realise and act on. that

while all Lankans will be losers in such an event, the Tamils in the war-scarred northeast will be the biggest losers." Excerpts:

"It's time to call the LTTE's bluff. U.S. Ambassador Ashley Wills made clear as early as April 2 that the Tigers, as members of a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO), will not be invited to the Washington meeting earlier this month to prepare for the major donor confab in Tokyo next June..."

"The LTTE must understand that threatening to sabotage the Tokyo meeting, undoubtedly with the intention of extracting some other concession, possibly something on the naval front given the most pressing issue of the moment, as an inducement to persuade them to attend, is not in the interest of Sri Lanka and most so not in the interest of the Tamil people of the north and the east that they claim to represent. If the Tokyo meeting is scuttled or postponed that means that there will be no international money quickly forthcoming to press on with the urgent task of undoing the ravages of the war"

"The country desperately needs the money that will surely flow after the Tokyo meeting and the Tigers know this well. That is why they are trying to maximize the possibilities of the current scene resorting to the gun-at-the-head tactic. Colombo must not capitulate. The LTTE has for too long worn a look of injured innocence which Ambassador Wills tellingly exposed last week with some refreshing plain speak."

"Uncertainty on whether the Tokyo meeting will be held as scheduled in June or not will definitely affect high level participation. More importantly, international confidence in the likelihood of a honourable and durable peace being achieved in Sri Lanka will be seriously undermined. What the LTTE must realise and act on is that while all Lankans will be losers in such an event, the Tamils in the war-scarred northeast will be the biggest losers. So Russian roulette of the sort that is now being played is not the best route to the desired objective."

***** Under the headline, "International community's gesture," government-owned Sinhala Daily DINAMINA comments (4/26) that because of the LTTE suspension of talks ".the international community and the opposition have come to agree on the peace process with the Sri Lankan Government." Excerpts:

"There is a silver lining in every dark cloud. The silver lining in the dark clouds created by LTTE's pulling out of peace talks is now showing... The opposition had no clear idea about the peace process... there were different views on this and the LTTE... The general opinion of the opposition on the peace process was never a clear one..."

"But, no sooner LTTE pulling out was announced the opposition unanimously decided that negotiations should occur... The united opposition's standpoint that 'peace talks should continue' is a positive factor. ...International community is pressurizing the LTTE on this...US, India and France...."

"US Ambassador on the 24th has said that LTTE, should come to the negotiations table if they genuinely represent Tamils and that their facts are just magnified and unacceptable... US Ambassador has also pointed out that SLG alone should not be blamed for the violations of MOU.... He has strongly criticized some LTTE acts... North east destruction has been caused by Sri Lankan governments as well as LTTE and he has emphasized that LTTE must return to peace talks..."

"Meanwhile, America stresses that LTTE should renounce terrorism by word and deed. the international community led by America says that Sri Lanka should be a democratic and united country and no single ethnicity should be penalised. This shows the irrelevance of the anti peace groups' calling the peace process an attempt to divide the country."

"With this decision of the LTTE, the international community and the opposition have come to agree on the peace process with the SLG. These silver linings on the dark clouds should be considered as blessings... all parties should dedicate themselves to peace... then our dream will be realized..."

***** Under the headline, "LTTE cannot boycott negotiations," independent Sinhala weekly LAKBIMA comments that with the involvement of the international community, "Sri Lanka's peace or war is not managed solely by Colombo or Wanni." Excerpts:

"It is very important for LTTE to attend negotiations... but they show as if it is of no importance to them... State media also showed that it is the SLG that would lose if Tigers pulled out from talks... But the public although hard-bitten by the previous wars was not shaken. They knew

that LTTE cannot boycott talks..."

"This was the exact statement of the US Ambassador Ashley Wills... he said that their reasoning was not acceptable and that they have attend talks...he stressed on the importance of their coming to Tokyo peace talks... listed child abductions, intimidation of Muslims.....and said that this behavior would not help build confidence on tigers That the international community would respect them if they renounced terrorism..."

"Earlier, efforts were made to get the international community in between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE... now not only they are here but they offer to advise and guide if one party detours... we are not in a position to blame anyone... this is what we have created... As we once said, Sri Lanka's peace or war is not managed solely by Colombo or Wanni"

***** Under the headline, "'Sri Lankan Government and opposition agree on a solution through negotiations," government-owned Sinhala weekly SILUMINA comments (4/27): "[the LTTE] cannot opt for war as the Sri Lankan Government has kept the international community abreast of the real situation...." Excerpts:

"...Several groups were blaming the peace process saying that it attempts to divide the country... people in the North as well as the international community push LTTE towards peace... many analysts believe that this pulling out is just in order to win some of their demands.....But they cannot opt for war as SLG has kept the international community abreast of the real situation...."

"Analyzing the facts listed by LTTE, the American Ambassador says that they are not acceptable... while accepting the mistakes of SLG, he has pointed out the serious violations of MOU by LTTE. But when terrorist organizations opt for peace serious incidents can be expected."

"Without acting as opportunists, we all must realize tat this we have come to a decisive point where we all should solve this national crisis...."

***** Under the headline, "Appreciating the American Ambassador's statement," independent Sinhala daily LANKADEEPA, commented (4/28), "the Tigers who call themselves genuine representatives of the Tamils should try and let these people reap peace benefits by returning to peace talks." Excerpts:

"LTTE before asking the Sri Lankan government about its good response to MOU conditions should ask themselves whether their response to same had been positive... Can they point their fingers at somebody else? SLMM itself has said that LTTE had more violations on their account... As Mr. Wills very correctly points out SLG alone should not be blamed for violations of MOU..."

"Ambassador Wills has given an excellent response to the resettlement issues and its slow progress... he said that "Expectations on development in the south as well as the north are very high... All Sri Lankans should understand economic development takes time and it would accelerate only in lasting peace; Sri Lanka has not yet achieved that... And he further said that lasting peace can only be achieved by attending the peace talks and not by walking away from it... We too agree that Tigers should know the importance of sticking to the peace talks and discussing the issues faced by both parties..."

"The fact that Tiger reasoning is not acceptable and blown up... If lasting peace is achieved, highest benefits of peace would be enjoyed by the suffering communities in the north... The Tigers who call themselves genuine representatives of the Tamils should try and let these people reap peace benefits by returning to peace talks..."

***** Under the headline, "US Ambassador's request," Independent Tamil daily, VIRAKESARI (4/26) comments, "the talks should continue with commitment for the sake of peace and its benefits. In the meantime, the Government should implement the decisions taken at the previous talks." Excerpts:

"US Ambassador Ashley Wills has requested the Tiger Organization to reverse its decision and to participate at talks for the welfare of the Tamils."

"Many including the President, Opposition Leader, JVP and Sihala Urumaya criticized the LTTE pull out and Sihala Urumaya called for the immediate commencement of the war."

"Internationally there were comments and VIP's of many countries including US and India had requested not to break talks."

"US Ambassador Ashley Wills has given his complete views. He stated that he regretted the decision of the Tigers and that they should review their decision and to attend talks..It is not possible to rebuild a country that is economically devastated in no time. North and East of Sri Lanka are awaiting much economic development."

"All the Sri Lankan governments are responsible for the fate of North and East. US Ambassador stated that Tigers are also responsible for the present economic position in N&E. He said that Rome was not built in a day. Likewise it is not possible to rebuild Kilinochchi or Trinco within a day."

"It should be noted that there were many good results. Therefore, the talks should continue with commitment for the sake of peace and its benefits. In the meantime, the Government should implement the decisions taken at the previous talks."

***** Under the headline, "Talks must continue" independent Tamil daily, THINAKKURAL comments (4/26), "From all corners pressure is building up to commence the peace talks again." Excerpts:

"No one needs to say that the ceasefire agreement is broken. Necessity to put the peace program on correct track is the order of the temporary suspension of talks. From all corners pressure is building up to commence the peace talks again."

"Liberation Tigers should not pull out of talks. They should attend the Tokyo Aid Conference. The decision to boycott the Tokyo Aid Conference was regrettable. The Tigers want to be treated respectfully. My government understands that, said the US Ambassador Ashley Wills, which is the US stand."

"Not only the US Ambassador but also the US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage have expressed their

SIPDIS views that the US government will not hesitate to lift the ban on LTTE and accept them as a political group if they renounce violence."

"The decision of the Liberation Tigers to pull out temporarily from talks is appropriate. Thereafter they were to boycott the SIHRN Sub Committee meeting in Kilinochchi, which was to be attended by the government officials and the Norwegian diplomats..."

Opinion

14. ***** Under the headline, "Sound and fury and little else," independent English weekly, Sunday Times' political editor wrote, "Uncle Ashley Wills let [the LTTE] have it in his interview with Reuters." Excerpts:

"..Others, however, have a different view. They argue that foreign policy has never been the LTTE's forte, and by taking on the United States of America by criticising them for being left out of the Washington aid talks last week, they were taken up by the bold resistance of possibly, the Iraqi Baath Party."
"They invited trouble from Uncle Sam, and Uncle Ashly Wills let them have it in his interview with Reuters. Lest the Sri Lankan yakkos missed the US ambassador's comments, the US embassy in Colombo circulated the full text to the local media."

"And now, Anton Balasingham has responded with an interview to Tamilnet and the LTTE has now got entangled with the US, and one wonders whether the fate of Tareq Aziz would befall Anton Balasingham. Surely not."

***** Government-owned English DAILY NEWS (4/26), headlined its opinion page. "Way out of ethnic conflict is through negotiations - US Envoy" and printed the full text of the Ambassador's Reuters interview.

***** Government-owned English weekly, Sunday Observer (4/27) ran "US ambassador's reaction to LTTE suspension of peace talks : 'time for fighting has long passed'" on its opinion page and included significant portions of the Ambassador's interview.

***** Under the headline, "None of that crap, Bala" typically skeptical opposition English weekly, ISLAND SUNDAY opinion writer agrees with Ambassador Wills' statements, noting "Forgive us, but that sounds kind of right." (4/27). Excerpts:

"But let's stop the nit-picking, shall we. (For the benefit of those who haven't been following our peace process closely, any criticism of the LTTE is nit-picking and betrays a shallow mind and supremely immature outlook)."
"US Ambassador Ashley Wills in a Reuters interview last week aptly summarised the (long?) list of LTTE transgressions. "Assassinations of opponents, intimidation of Muslims, taxation without representation, aggressive Sea Tiger behaviour and continued child recruitment," he enumerated."

"Humph. Immature, nit-picking AMERICAN. Don't you think, Bala?"

"But the international community is not pleased. Oh no. To quote that American again, "A well-intentioned party that truly wants a peaceful, political settlement to Sri Lanka's conflict could deal with such grievances at the negotiating table". Forgive us, but that sounds kind of right."

***** Under the headline "Economic growth dependent on political and military stability," Pro-UNP English weekly, SUNDAY LEADER (4/27), offered more opinion. Excerpts:

"...And the big boys in the world scene were telling the LTTE, diplomatically, that they were not willing to play ball and the status quo remained. However, the biggest boost to the government and the biggest snub to the LTTE came from the US. "We don't find them (LTTE) convincing. A well-intentioned party that truly wants a peaceful, political settlement to Sri Lanka's conflict could deal with such grievances at the negotiating table," Ambassador Ashley Wills said last week... The Americans would create most pressure for the LTTE. Most observers believe that if the Tigers stick to their guns of insisting that they boycott the Tokyo meeting, the US is very likely to exert pressure."

Wills